



Across Cultures and Continents Theme Essay



"Across Cultures and Continents" theme materials created for Let's Talk About It by Ron McFarland, University of Idaho, 2007.

Theme Essay

The term "global village" appears to have been coined by Wyndham Lewis in his book *America and Cosmic Man* in 1948 and popularized by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962. It is appropriate that I have gleaned this information from the Internet, specifically from the still somewhat controversial Wikipedia website, because the words describe "how electronic mass media collapse space and time barriers in human communication, enabling people to interact and live on a global scale." The concepts of "multi-nationalism" and "cultural pluralism" have acquired a positive connotation for many Americans, and investors find themselves being advised to expand their portfolios to account for international economies. Environmentalists troubled by ominous signs of global warming remind us that local, regional, or national remedies are not likely to prove sufficient: we must be as concerned about the Amazon rain forests, the mangrove swamps in Southeast Asia, and desertification in Africa as we are about wildfires in California, the ongoing drought in Florida, and threatened salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest.

The premise that the World Wide Web might somehow transform the globe into a village, with something of its welcoming familiarity and intimacy, may strike us as optimistic, even idealistic, a metaphor at best. At this writing, in fact, the world appears to be every bit as strange and estranging, as uncertain and dangerous as it ever was. The term "Third World," as it applies to industrially underdeveloped nations with respect to quality of life as well as economy, was first used by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952. Today some refer to Fourth World in order to describe the least developed among those nations, just as some sociologists have adopted Charles Murray's "underclass," as popularized in his book *Losing Ground* in 1984, to account for those whose status appears to fall below what has conventionally been called "lower class." Lashing out against European colonialism and racism, the Marxist essayist Franz Fanon may have suggested an apt name for these people in his 1961 book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. While world wars may have lapsed, more localized wars continue to rage from Afghanistan to the Sudan and from Iraq to Sri Lanka. International terrorism shows no signs of abating.

As intelligent and concerned citizens of Western nations, most of which are of the First World, we are increasingly being called upon to expand our cultural horizons. How have we in the United States done that? Since 1961 nearly 200,000 have served in the Peace Corps in some 140 countries. New emphasis has been placed on bilingual education, particularly in states bordering Mexico, but will U.S. citizens ever approach those of Canada, where French has been declared a second official language and public school education in that language made mandatory? Given the recent declaration of English as the “official” language by the Idaho state legislature, one suspects not. We remain suspiciously proud of our insularity, all but nostalgic for the isolationism of a former era. Nevertheless, recent statistics indicate that Hispanics outnumber all other ethnic or racial entities (Native American, African-American, and Asian-American) combined in Idaho, and that demographic fact is becoming common throughout the nation. In effect, the world is coming to us whether we wish to come to it or not.

Aside from travel to other lands for business or pleasure and the study of foreign languages and world history, surely the best way of coming to an understanding of the world beyond us is through reading the best of what accomplished authors from other nations have written. Often writers of fiction and memoir not only convey the most direct and authentic sort of information about what life is like, for example, in India or Nigeria, about the sights, sounds, and smells of the place, about the beliefs and customs, but also they offer the most sensitive and powerful insights into their world. A good history book might be essential for a full grasp of French society during the Age of Reason or The Enlightenment (ca. 1660-1790), but to understand the ethos of that time and place, the fundamental spirit of that culture, surely the best reading would be the satiric comedies of Molière and Voltaire’s *Candide*. The books in this series have been selected with that sort of model in mind.

In establishing guidelines we decided to focus specifically on writing from Central and South American (including the Caribbean), Africa, Asia (including the Middle East), and Australia. We have selected books published over the past twenty years that generally concern recent as opposed to past historical events, and we have chosen writing in which the authors have imparted some sense of what life in that particular part of the world is like. What is exotic and wonderful, or strangely familiar, or disturbing, about Cuba, India, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Australia? In reading the books in this series we will be taken outside of ourselves, perhaps outside of our comfort zones, at least temporarily, and we will leave the books feeling that we have been invited in, that we have become, briefly at least, insiders, citizens of another place and ethos, participants in another culture.